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Los Angeles City Planning 1781-1981

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Introduction

In 1981 the City of Los Angeles observed the 200th anniversary of its founding. As cities go, Los Angeles is a young city. Only in recent years has it become a major world trade center and center of financial, industrial and commercial activity. Its development history is a fascinating subject and can best be described through a discussion of its various city plans. This pamphlet provides such a discussion and includes information about the evolution of the City's Planning Department.

Planning History

First Plans Under the authority of the King of Spain, Governor Felipe de Neve was given permission to establish a pueblo along the Porciuncula (later Los Angeles) River to provide a food source for Spanish troops stationed in San Diego and Santa Barbara. De Neve drew up a plan locating the pueblo on high ground to protect the settlement from flooding. The plan included sites for a public plaza, church, homes, and farms as well as an irrigation system and a road connecting the pueblo to the Mission at San Gabriel. He handpicked eleven families to be the first colonists and on September 4, 1781 assigned them their lands and marched them under armed guard to the site. The soldiers apparently guarded the colonists and, more importantly, kept them at their assigned tasks. Colonists who remained for a period of five years were granted deeds to their lands and additional lands on which to expand their homes and corn farming. Since the course of the river changed year by year, the location of the original site is unknown but believed to have been east of the present El Pueblo historical site.

When United States Army Engineer E.O.C. Ord completed the City's first official survey and mapping in 1849, Los Angeles had a mere 2,000 inhabitants. Except for a brief surge in growth after 1880 when the Santa Fe Railroad link connected Los Angeles with the Midwest, little growth took place over the next decades. By 1890 only 50,000 people lived in the City. But things soon would change.

Water and Power William Doheny dug a well by hand in 1892 and discovered oil at what is now Second Street and Glendale Boulevard. By 1900 Los Angeles was the oil center of the west and City fathers were dreaming of Los Angeles becoming the greatest city in the world. What the arid land needed was water to enable growth to occur. William Mulholland, the City Engineer and first Superintendent of the Water Department, shared this dream and designed a far flung water system and campaigned for the funds and authority to bring water to the City. Along with the reservoirs and local waterworks, he secured passage of a \$1,500,000 bond issue (1905) to bring water from the Owens Valley located at the foot of the mighty Sierra Nevada Mountains, oversaw the construction of the 250 mile long Los Angeles Owens River Aqueduct (1913), and initiated a survey (1919) of 50,000 square miles of desert in search of additional water sources. The latter lead to the building of the Colorado River Aqueduct (1925-1941) and to the leading role of Los Angeles in convincing the United States Congress to construct Boulder (later renamed Hoover) Dam (1931-1935).

In the meantime, the City hired electrical engineer E.F. Scattergood to draw up plans for an electrical system which would take advantage of the Owens River aqueduct system. Scattergood became the City's first Chief Electrical

Engineer (1909) and planned and developed the massive hydroelectric system which would serve the City for decades. Scattergood's first power plant, the San Francisco Power Plant No. 1, became operational in 1917.

The optimistic vision of the City's early planners is especially remarkable considering that Los Angeles in 1905 had a population of 102,479 people, was 43.6 square miles in land area and was located in the middle of a semi-arid desert, surrounded by mountains and ocean and was a considerable distance from major trading routes, harbors and trading centers. Its major transportation link to a trading center was the Southern Pacific Railroad line to San Francisco which had opened in 1880. Undaunted by geographic adversity, the City proceeded to create its own environment and resources. For example, in 1909 it annexed a narrow strip of land connecting the City to a shallow harbor at San Pedro. In subsequent years the harbor was dredged and today is one of the world's major shipping ports.

In 1910 the City Council established a 15-member Planning Committee to develop "a comprehensive plan whereby Los Angeles may develop her material improvement along artistic as well as practical lines". Expansion of the City was of major interest to them. Recognizing that the terminus of the new Owens River Aqueduct was at the San Fernando Valley north of the City, they annexed the entire Valley in the same year the aqueduct was completed (1913). Water from the Sierras turned the Valley into rich ranch and farmlands. Today most of those lands have given way to commercial and residential development which houses one-third of the City's 2.9 million population.

Planning Commission/Department

Major annexations more than tripled the City's size in a single decade. By 1920 it had grown to 363.9 square miles but its population had only grown to 576,673. In that year the Planning Committee was replaced by a 52-member City Planning Commission comprised of representatives of the largest civic groups in Los Angeles. Gordon Whitnall was appointed the Commission's first secretary and served as its professional planner. Under Whitnall's guidance the Commission completed the City's first comprehensive Street Plan and comprehensive Zoning Ordinance. The latter replaced the 1904-1908 ordinance which had established the nation's first land use (zoning) designations. A major charter revision in 1925 reduced the Commission to five members and created a Planning Department. Whitnall was appointed the Department's first Director-Manager. Commissioners were citizens selected by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council. To the present day, appointed Commissioners serve five-year overlapping terms. Today the Commission holds all day meetings on Thursday either in the downtown City Hall or in the San Fernando Valley. In addition, Commissioners spend approximately half a day preparing for each weekly meeting and often conduct evening meetings on controversial issues and community plans. For this they receive the small sum of ten dollars for each meeting attended.

Before Whitnall resigned as Director (1930) he saw to it that a revised zoning ordinance was completed. The revised ordinance contained provisions for zone change and variance procedures; height, area, density and parking regulations; and new standardized zone categories. The 1930 ordinance did not undergo major structural reorgani-

zation until 1946 when, with Whitnall as a consultant, the current Planning and Zoning Code was adopted and the entire City was remapped.

General Plan Advisory Board

One of Whitnall's passions was engendering cooperation between governmental agencies. To this end he inaugurated informal "tea meetings" between himself and other City department heads. He and his colleagues discussed how to coordinate street, park and utility and other systems so that Los Angeles would be planned and developed in a logical fashion with adequate interconnecting facilities. The informal meetings were continued by Whitnall's successors and in 1941 formalized by the City Charter as the Coordinating Board (later renamed the Master Plan Advisory Board and, in 1979, the General Plan Advisory Board). The Board continues to meet regularly to advise the Director concerning matters relating to the General Plan.

Regional Planning Commission

Whitnall also convinced the Los Angeles City and County governments to establish the Los Angeles Regional Planning Commission. The Commission was formed in 1923 as a private organization to further cooperation between the cities and counties in the region. It was the first regional planning organization in the nation and for more than three decades was instrumental in encouraging intergovernmental cooperation and citizen participation in planning.

Office of Zoning Administration/Appeals Board

By 1930 Los Angeles was the largest city in the world. Its land area had grown to 441.7 square miles and its population to 1.2 million. Completion of another water project, Boulder Dam (in Nevada and Arizona) brought a new water

source to Los Angeles and assured the City of what was believed to be an unlimited water supply. In the same year (1935) discovery of oil in the Wilmington community of the City set off a new land development boom which overwhelmed Planning Director William N. Thorpe's 24-member planning staff. In one year building permits increased 35 percent and zoning cases 142 percent. Staff had little time to prepare the City's much needed master plan.

Under reforms initiated by Mayor Fletcher Bowron, with the advice and assistance of Whitnall, the Planning Department was modernized through Charter amendment in 1941. The Master Plan Advisory Board and position of Director of Planning were created and Office of Zoning Administration and its Appeals Board were established. The Director of Planning was charged with the task of preparing the Master Plan and administering the Department and the Commission was to supervise and direct the preparation of the Master Plan.

Creation of an Office of Zoning Administration and three-member appeals Board provided an independent agency within the Department and enabled the Commission and Director to spend more time with long range and policy planning. To this day the Office of Zoning Administration investigates cases, conducts hearings and makes determinations concerning conditional uses, zone variances and other zoning matters and the Board hears and makes determinations concerning appeals of Zoning Administrator determinations. As in 1941, today the five citizen Board members are appointed by the Mayor with the concurrence of the City Council and serve five-year overlapping terms. They meet every Tuesday afternoon and receive ten dollars for each meeting attended.

During World War II the majority of the variances processed by the Office of Zoning Administration were related directly to the military effort, such as development of sites for war related industries. Many of these industries later evolved into aerospace industries and played important roles in the U.S. Space program. During the same period, subdivision filings slowed to a low of 52 in 1942. This lull did not last long. With the end of the War (1945) many military personnel who had been stationed in California or had shipped out from the State to battlefields in Asia and the South Pacific returned. Their migration to the West Coast was encouraged by low term Federal loans which enabled them to purchase or build their own homes. The post-war population boom began.

Freeway/Skyscraper Development

In 1950 the four-level freeway interchange near the civic center was completed. More than any other structure, the interchange became the symbol of the growing Los Angeles. Plans for a comprehensive "freeway" system were begun in the early 1930s by the Planning Department, the Automobile Club of Southern California (founded in 1900), the California State Highway Commission and local jurisdictions. In 1933 the Planning Department submitted plans for the Elysian Park-Civic Center Parkway (later Pasadena Freeway) and for the extension of Ramona Boulevard (later San Bernardino Freeway) to the proposed Union Station in the Civic Center. In 1939 the Department revised its Master Plan of Freeways. That Plan was in effect until 1955 when the City recommended to the State that freeways be redesignated as "highways" so the state would have the authority to construct the systems with State funds. The State made the redesignation and took

over freeway design and construction. It had constructed 59.8 miles of freeways in the City by 1958 and 155 miles of freeways by the end of 1979.

The advent of concrete and steel construction technology enabled the building of freeways and their soaring overpass arches and also enabled the construction of high rise buildings. In 1956 the 1911 earthquake provision limiting the height of buildings to 150 feet was lifted. The Zoning Code was amended to allow new buildings to be built to unlimited heights as long as their height did not exceed thirteen times their buildable area. The 26-story City Hall, the tallest building in the City, soon would be surpassed by structures towering to 62-stories.

With new development and a changing urban form from low rise to high rise, came an interest in city beautification and development of identifiable urban "centers". Under the 1948 Federal Redevelopment Act, the new Redevelopment Agency with the assistance of the Planning Department, prepared the Ann Street Redevelopment Project Ordinance. Signed into law by Mayor Norris Poulson in 1954, the project was the State's first redevelopment project. Other projects were to follow throughout the City. They took various forms from the high rise developments in the Central City to the neighborhood rehabilitation projects in South Central Los Angeles. The Central City Committee was formed by Poulson in 1958 to prepare a plan for the development of the downtown area. The Committee completed its work in 1962 and was reconvened by Mayor Sam Yorty ten years later to help the Planning Department update the plan. The plan was adopted in 1974 and today provides the policy basis for the Central City Redevelopment Project.

Planning Today

In April of 1965 the City launched the Goals Program. This massive effort involved over 70,000 citizens in providing ideas about planning the City's future. Under the direction of Planning Director Calvin S. Hamilton, the ideas were shaped into the City's first comprehensive General Plan. The first element of the Plan, the 50-year "Concept Plan", was released in 1970. Citizens also helped staff formulate the other approximately 70 plans which together make up the General Plan. These include plans as diverse as rapid transit and equestrian trails. The Department's current work program includes preparation of specific ordinances to implement the adopted plans.

During this period, a major change was taking place in the City. Growth had begun to slow, increasing from 2.5 million in 1960 to only 2.8 million in 1970 and remaining at that figure for the remainder of the decade. Citizens throughout the nation were taking an active interest in protecting natural resources and their communities. In Los Angeles public activism focused on stopping freeways from bisecting neighborhoods, in protecting the miles of beaches and mountain ranges which bordered and crossed the City and in preserving existing single-family residential neighborhoods. The 1970 Federal Environmental Quality Act, which required environmental reports on major projects, became a primary tool for citizens to use in demanding environmentally sensitive public planning policy and decision making.

Since the turn of the century the State had consistently allowed charter cities, such as Los Angeles, to prepare their own plans and to handle land development as they saw fit. With the public concern about a deteriorating environment,

the State became increasingly involved in local planning. For example, between 1965 and 1975 the State of California required that all cities prepare and adopt general plans which were to include technical elements such as housing and seismic safety plans. Some of these elements were given completion deadlines and were required to contain specified features.

A radical shift was taking place in planning. Local agencies were faced with a plethora of often overlapping Federal and State requirements affecting land development. Federal environmental standards for cleaning up air and water required regional planning and coordination. For the first time in its history, the City received Federal financial grants for planning. In 1960 the City did not receive any grant monies from the Federal government. Mayor Tom Bradley actively sought grants and by 1980 the City's share of Federal monies had reached \$900 million annually. Many of these funds were channeled through the regional planning agency, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) which coordinated plan preparation to assure compatibility with regional environmental quality goals including population allocation.

Los Angeles city planning has become a highly complex process in which regional and interagency coordination is not just a good idea, it is a necessity. As the City matures, redevelopment, renewal and preservation are becoming the primary concern of the Planning Department because the few undeveloped lands which remain tend to be in the least accessible areas and steepest portions of the City's mountain ranges. The sheer size of the City and imposition of Federal and State land development requirements has

resulted in highly technical, complex and time consuming planning and development processing. The "no growth" pressures of the early 1970s are giving way to demands for more housing and increased employment. The City's low density, single-family residential character has an added dimension of high rise centers and corridors which give the City a new and exciting visual profile. Change is the life-blood of the City and planning has been and remains the mechanism for guiding that change to benefit the City's present and future inhabitants.

Additional Suggested Reading

Bowron, Fletcher and Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. *Los Angeles and Its Environs in the Twentieth Century: A Bibliography of A Metropolis*, Ward Ritchie Press, Los Angeles, 1973. The "planning" section contains a comprehensive listing of papers, articles and books written with reference to Los Angeles.

Cameron, Robert. *Above Los Angeles: A Collection of Nostalgic and Contemporary Aerial Photographs of Greater Los Angeles*, Robert Cameron and Company, San Francisco, 1976. The unusual physical features and configurations of Los Angeles are graphically described in this book.

"From Pueblo to Metropolis: Water and Power in the Story of Los Angeles", Department of Water and Power, Los Angeles, 1973. In many respects the history of Los Angeles is told through the history of its water and power systems. This excellent brochure tells that story. Available from the Public Affairs Department of Water and Power, 111 North Hope Street, Los Angeles, California 90012.

Harlow, Neal. *Maps and Surveys of the Pueblo Lands of Los Angeles*, Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles, 1976. A beautifully printed and fascinating book about the early settlers and plans of the pueblo.

Selected Statistics

City	1930	1979
Land Area third largest in U.S.A.	1,144.0 km 441.7 sq. mi.	1,203.0 km 464.5 sq. mi.
Population second largest in U.S.A.	1,238,048	2,957,052
Planning Department	1927-1928	1977-1978
Zoning Cases	623	2,109
Other Commission Actions	82	929
Tentative/Tract Maps considered	478	1,303
Acreage Involved	5,047.4	3,306.87
Number of Lots	13,720	4,587
Budget	\$36,459	\$4,843,432
Staff	14	227

Miscellaneous City 1979

City parklands:	14,489.63 acres 58.6 km
Largest park:	Griffith Park 4,107.87 acres; 16.6 km
Roads, excluding freeways and alleys:	6,427 miles 10,343.25 km
Freeways:	155 miles 249.44 km
Busiest intersection in the world:	Wilshire and Westwood Boulevard
Longest Street:	Sepulveda Boulevard 30.8 miles; 49.56 km
Largest all bus system in the world:	Southern California Rapid Transit District serving Los Angeles and five counties: 2,830 buses, 4,800 drivers, 99 million bus miles 159 million km traveled
Highest Elevation:	5,080 feet 1,548 meters
Lowest Elevation:	Sea level
Mean Temperature:	63.2 degrees
Last major earthquake:	February 9, 1971 6.4 magnitude

Los Angeles City Planning Department

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